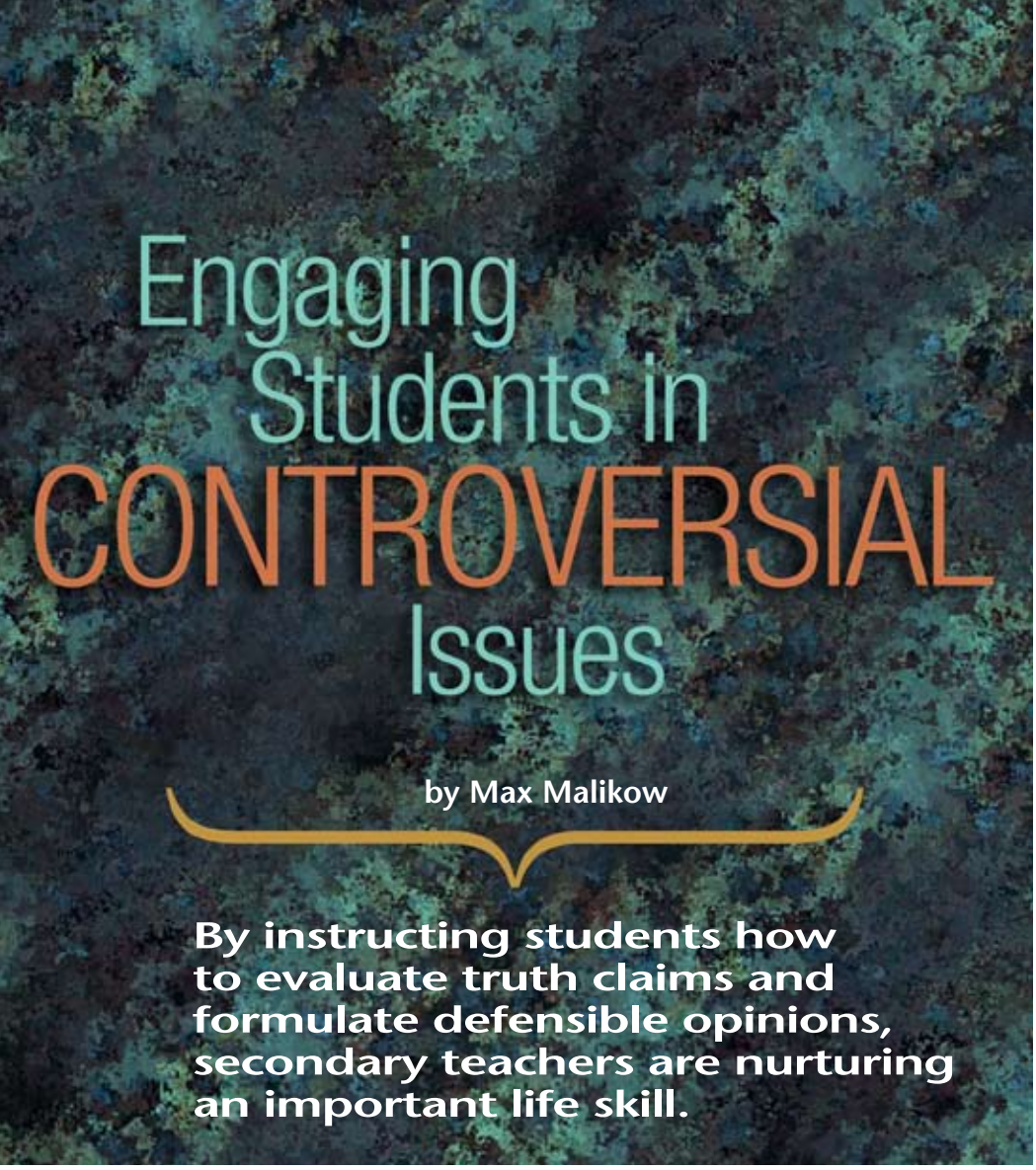


Approximately a year ago, an upstate New York college withdrew a speaking invitation to Wade Churchill, a University of Colorado professor who had characterized 9/11 victims as "little Eichmanns" (Churchill 2003, 5). Churchill's portrayal of 9/11 victims as a mixture of conscious and unwitting participants in a systemic evil of Holocaust proportions indeed was controversial. The decision of Hamilton College to retract its invitation exacerbated an existing controversy concerning the First Amendment and academic freedom.

At that time, Professor Churchill was sharing the media's attention with Terri Schiavo, a woman diagnosed as in a persistent vegetative state and being nourished through a feeding tube. Other recurring and controversial news stories in that same period concerned stem cell research, intelligent design and, of course, the war in Iraq.

This essay makes no contribution to the discussion of any of these controversial issues. Rather, the intent of this article is to provide secondary teachers of any subject with guidance for considering and conducting discussions of controversial issues with their students. Three questions frame this discourse:

1. What is the nature of controversy?
2. How do teachers determine when to engage students in a controversial issue?
3. How should teachers conduct themselves when teaching a controversial issue?

What Is the Nature of Controversy?

A controversy exists when both a strong intellectual argument can be made for two or more conflicting positions, and the issue in dispute involves two or more parties with equal and competing interests. Hess (2001, 1) offered a similar criterion for a controversial issue by characterizing it as an issue that "involves a clear conflict between competing values (such as equality and liberty)."

Abraham Lincoln showed his recognition of the dispute over slavery as a controversy with his observation that good men on both sides were in disagreement (Delbanco 1992). Journalist Andy Rooney (1985, 55) has written that some controversies make him "firmly of two minds." Conditions that generate controversies often manifest as dilemmas, which have been characterized as situations in which no matter what you choose, you are wrong.

How Do Teachers Determine When to Engage Students in a Controversial Issue?

Shakespeare's (2004, 1.3.68) Polonius advised that deliberating before entering into a conflict is wise,

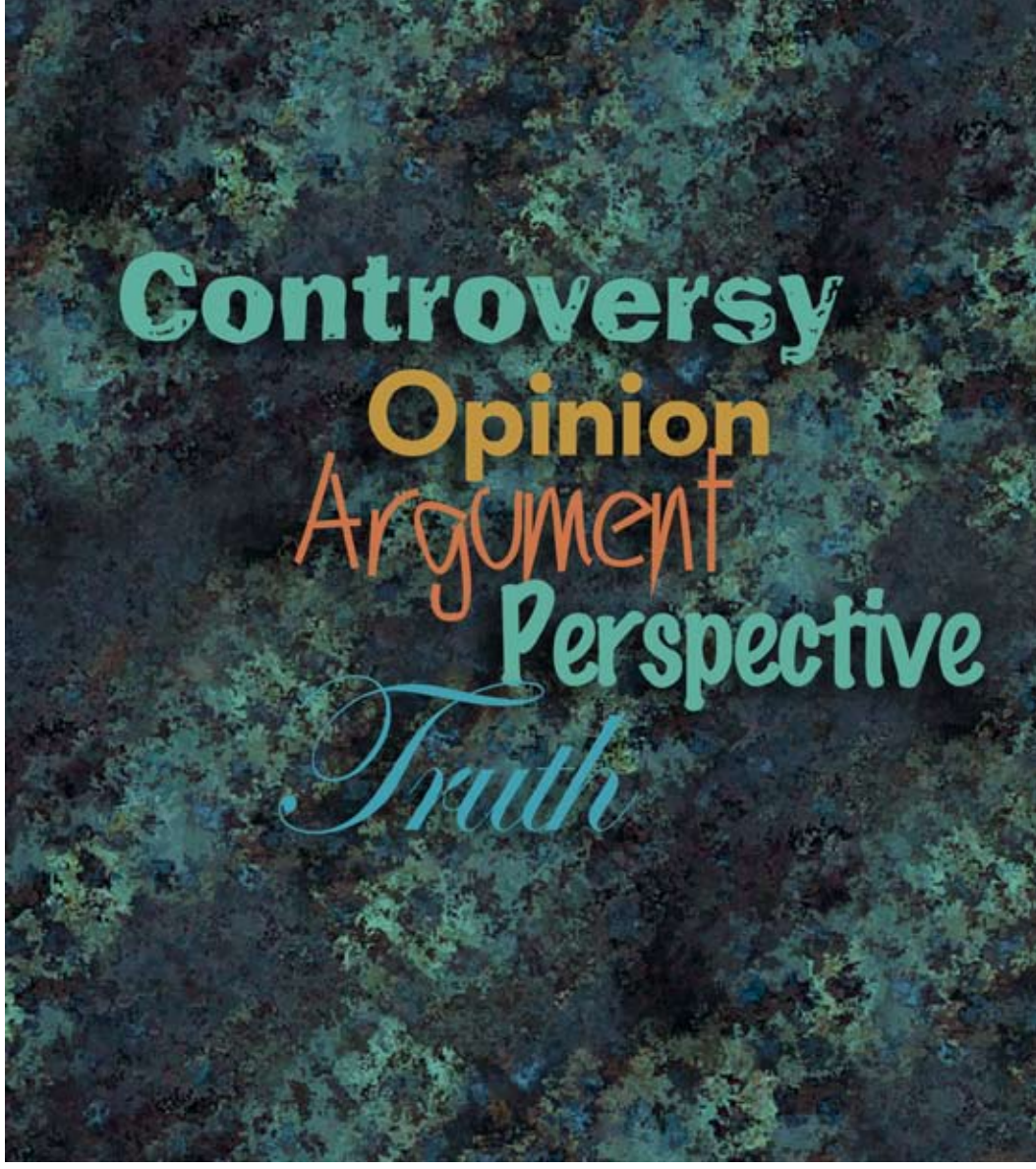
Max Malikow *is an Assistant Professor of Education at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, New York, and Adjunct Professor of Psychology at Syracuse University. His teaching career includes 20 years in secondary education as a social studies teacher. He is a member of the Upsilon Psi Chapter of Kappa Delta Pi and serves on the editorial review panel for* The Educational Forum*, a scholarly journal published by KDP.*

but once involved to engage with full vigor: "Beware of the entrance to a quarrel, but being in, bear't that the opposed may beware of thee." The following questions might be helpful in a pre-engagement deliberation.

Is the topic truly controversial? This should be an easy question to answer. If disputing parties have articulated well-reasoned positions, then a controversy exists. As previously stated, a truly controversial issue is likely to involve competing interests or values.

To whom is this issue important? Among whom is the controversy being disputed? Appearance to the contrary, these are two different questions. For example, in the case of Professor Churchill, the controversy surrounding him was important to the Hamilton College and University of Colorado communities. However, the disputing parties included countless individuals interested in the First Amendment and academic freedom. Media coverage showed that Churchill had support and opposition among lawyers, professors, teachers, school administrators, talk-show personalities, and citizens at-large. Another factor to consider is "the likelihood that students will be interested in the issue and will want to discuss it" (Hess 2001, 1).

What is the topic of the controversy? A suggested sequence for clarifying a research project is: *topic, problem,* and *rationale* (Booth, Colomb, and Williams 1995). The topic is the subject of the problem to be investigated. The rationale is the reason(s) why the proposed research has value. To return to the example involving Churchill, the problem is his characterization of 9/11 victims as akin to Nazis. The topic of this controversy is freedom of expression. Before teaching a controversial issue, the topic of the controversy must be identified.



Once the topic is identified, the relevant question is: ***Is this topic a part of the course's curriculum?*** Hess (2001, 1) referred to this as "the connection between a specific issue and some larger curricular goal." The answer to this question could provide reassurance that the topic is appropriate for the class.

Because courses have objectives as well as content, a second curricular question to be answered is: ***Would engagement in this topic contribute to this course's stated objectives for the students?*** The answer to this question could confirm that consideration of this topic is compatible with the intended learning outcomes. Requiring students to locate the source in which Churchill employed the phrase "little Eichmanns" to ascertain exactly what he said and the context in which he said it would contribute to the development of their research skills. Further, a discussion of this controversy could nurture students in the development of critical thinking and tolerance for the expression of unpopular ideas as well as appropriate responses to disagreeable points of view.

Another factor when considering the propriety of a controversial topic is the individuals who are not present but might influence or be affected by the discussion. A spirited discourse on America's military presence in Iraq might be painful for the student who has a brother stationed there. The intensity of a discussion varies directly with the probability that it will be reported to parents, administrators, and others. Anticipating this probability is prudent when weighing the inclusion of a controversial topic. Lawrence-Lightfoot

(2003, 3) has written of "ghosts in the classroom," and their presence should be taken into account.

How Should Teachers Conduct Themselves When Teaching a Controversial Issue?

After determining that a controversial issue's inclusion in a course can be defended in terms of content and objectives, the teacher must be concerned with pedagogy. The teaching of controversial issues is no different from any other category of instruction. All teaching should be conducted with authenticity and integrity.

Authenticity

To consider authenticity's opposite characteristic—phoniness—is to recognize authenticity as a virtue. Shakespeare's (2004, 3.4.151) instruction to "Assume a virtue, if you have it not" cannot apply to authenticity. Feigned authenticity is an oxymoron. Further, it is an insult to students. If a teacher has a position on a controversial issue and claims otherwise, he or she is implying to students: "You can't handle the truth!" (Sorkin 1991).

The teacher who admits to having a position on a disputable matter and refuses to share it is being authentic. However, a subtle insult to students is embedded in this approach. The insult is the implication that the teacher's influence is too strong for the students to resist. This logic contains a hint of arrogance within its assumption that if students are privy to a teacher's opinion, they will embrace it *because* the teacher holds it. Visano's idealization of a teacher as a "guide on the side" rather than a "sage on the stage" (Visano and Jakubowski 2002, 115) was a pithy description of a teacher's role in these in-class discussions.

Integrity

When direct instruction on a controversial topic is given, the presentation should have integrity. The word integrity means wholeness. Teaching with integrity includes giving the strongest possible representation of all sides of an issue.

A paradigm for teaching with integrity is a jury trial. In a criminal proceeding, two arguments are made to a jury. The prosecution and defense make presentations that take into account the strengths of the opposition's case. This procedure is intended to provide jurors with as much information as possible in preparation for their deliberation. In the teaching of controversial issues, responsible pedagogy requires a conscientious effort to present all relevant and viable perspectives. Like a jury trial, opposing arguments are made. Unlike a jury trial, one person—the teacher—addresses the strengths and weaknesses of competing arguments. When making a presentation on a controversial issue, the result would be pedagogical malpractice to do any less than the work of two opposing attorneys.

Hess (2005, 48) offered teachers four approaches to controversial issues:

1. *Denial:* Refuse to admit that an issue is controversial.
2. *Avoidance:* Evade teaching an issue recognized as controversial.
3. *Privilege:* Teach only a favored point of view.
4. *Balance:* Present a fair representation of various positions.

Hess (2005, 47) advocated *balance* and confessed that the disclosure of her own opinions to students is an issue "with which I have personally wrestled since the beginning of my teaching career."

Nurturing authenticity and integrity in students is to encourage them in the acquisition of a life skill that will benefit them beyond the classroom. Teachers have an opportunity to model that having a carefully considered opinion does not preclude conceding the strengths of an opposing position. Further, being able to articulate the process by which an opposing conclusion was reached is a demonstration of how to listen and show respect for another person in an interpersonal conflict. The ability to paraphrase the argument of another *(mirroring)* is an invaluable interpersonal skill (Hendrix 1988).

Final Thoughts

Teaching includes instructing students in the evaluation of truth claims. In a sense, every class is a philosophy class in that epistemology (the study of truth-seeking) and logic (the science of correct reasoning) are taught by way of demonstration. Controversial issues provide rich and exciting opportunities for learning how to formulate defensible opinions and, perhaps, locate truth. Potentially, each edition of the daily newspaper provides the raw material for constructivist learning. Teachers who show that they have weighed and measured alternative points of view are encouraging their students to do the same in matters academic as well as personal.

References

Booth, W. C., G. G. Colomb, and J. M. Williams. 1995. *The craft of research.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Churchill, W. 2003. *On the justice of roosting chickens: Reflections on the consequences of U.S. imperial arrogance and criminality.* Oakland, CA: AK Press.

Delbanco, A., ed. 1992. *The portable Abraham Lincoln.* New York: Viking.

Hendrix, H. 1988. *Getting the love you want: A guide for couples.* New York: Henry Holt.

Hess, D. 2001. Teaching students to discuss controversial public issues. Bloomington: Indiana University Social Development Center. Available at: *www.indiana.edu/~ssdc/cpidig.htm.*

Hess, D. 2005. How do teachers' political views influence teaching about controversial issues? *Social Education* 69(Jan/Feb): 47–48.

Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. 2003. *The essential conversation: What parents and teachers can learn from each other.* New York: Random House.

Rooney, A. A. 1985. *Pieces of my mind.* New York: Avon.

Shakespeare, W. 2004. *Hamlet,* ed. P A. Cantor. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Sorkin, A. 1991. *A few good men.* Screenplay for Columbia Tri-Star.

Visano, L., and L. Jakubowski. 2002. *Teaching controversy.* Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing.